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KHALID SINDAWI

THE ROLE OF BIRDS IN SHĪᶜITE THOUGHT

Introduction

The purpose of the present article is to analyze the role which birds play in the thought of Twelver Shīᶜism[1] by way of providing a typology of relevant traditions. The choice of topic is based on two main considerations. First of all, the sheer number of Shīᶜite traditions in which birds appear is quite large, especially when compared with the mention of other creatures, and in these traditions birds play a considerable variety of roles. Secondly, the whole subject of birds and their role in Shīᶜite thought has to the best of our knowledge as yet not received the treatment it deserves. While the study is based on quite a few different Shīᶜite compositions the following four works are the core sources:

1. *Baṣāᵓir al-darajāt fī faḍāᵓil Āl Muḥammad* by Abū Jaᶜfar b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Farūkh al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī[2] (d. 290/903). Al-Ṣaffār was a contemporary of the tenth and eleventh imāms of Twelver Shīᶜism (ᶜAlī b. Muḥammad al-Hādī[3] d. 254/868, and Ḥasan al-ᶜAskarī[4] d. 260/874, respectively). The value of this work for the present paper lies mainly in the fact that it contains very old Shīᶜite traditions.

2. *Kitāb al-Kharāᵓij wa-l-jarāᵓiḥ*[5] by Quṭb al-Dīn Saᶜīd b. Hibat Allāh al-Rāwindī (d. 573/1177-8), Ibn Shahrāshūb's teacher. *K. al-Kharāᵓij* is devoted exclusively to tales of miracles associated with the imāms.

3. *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*[6] by Muḥammad b. ᶜAlī b. Shahrāshūb (d. 588/1192). Ibn Shahrāshūb was considered the greatest Shīᶜite scholar of his generation and earned the respect of Sunnīs as well. His *Manāqib* is a collection of biographies of the

[1] Whenever the words Shīᶜite, Shīᶜa and Shīᶜism are used in this paper they refer to Imāmī or Twelver Shīᶜism.

[2] For more on him see Amir-Moezzi, "Al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī", pp. 221-250.

[3] For details on him see Donaldson, *The Shiᶜite Religion*, pp. 209-216.

[4] For more on him see Lewis, "al-ᶜAskarī Abū l-Ḥasan", *EI*^{2}, vol. 7, p. 443.

[5] On this book see al-Ṭahrānī, *al-Dharīᶜa ilā taṣānīf al-shīᶜa*, vol. 7, pp. 145-146.

[6] For more on him see al-Amīn, *Aᶜyān al-shīᶜa*, vol. 35, pp. 16-24.

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imāms. Among the chapters devoted to each imām there are some dealing with the miracles attributed to them.

4. *Biḥār al-anwār*[7] by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī[8] (d. 1110/1698). Al-Majlisī, who devoted the greater part of his life to collecting Shīᶜite traditions, lived in Iṣfahān. In 1585 he was appointed by the Safavid ruler of Persia to the post of Shaykh al-Islām of Iṣfahān, a position which he used to promote the standing of Twelver Shīᶜism. His *Biḥār al-anwār* is based on numerous sources from different periods, including the three previously-mentioned works, making it possible to compare different versions of the traditions which appear in them.

The traditions in which birds play a major role are divided below into a number of groups. The main criterion for classification into the different groups is the character of the bird's role in the tradition. In the analysis of the functions of birds in Shīᶜite thought we also took into consideration, wherever possible, the chronological order based on the years of the imāms' deaths. Where several traditions deal with the same topic and contribute little that is new with respect either to the role of the bird or the imām's powers, some traditions are mentioned only in a footnote while a small number have been deleted entirely from this account. Our analysis of the role of birds in Shīᶜite thought will cover the following points:

- What birds are mentioned in Shīᶜite traditions?
- What roles do these birds play?

Before opening the discussion on these points we present the reader with a survey of what classical Arabic sources have to say on the subject of birds.

Birds in classical Arabic literature[9]

In classical Arabic literature animals of many kinds are mentioned, often in relation to their usefulness to humans, etc. Small wonder, then, that Arabic dictionaries contain numerous names, and synonyms, for birds and animals. Following the establishment of the Abbasid State (750 CE) the Arabs began to classify the rich materials which had accumulated in the form of oral traditions and put them down in writing. Compositions in all branches of knowledge appeared, in many of which considerable space is devoted to a discussion of the various species of animals and birds, their traits, colors and more.[10]

7 For details on this work see: al-Ṭahrānī, *al-Dharīᶜa ilā taṣānīf al-shīᶜa*, vol. 3, pp. 16-26; Kohlberg, "Beḥār al-Anwār", *E.Ir.*, vol. 4, pp. 90-93.

8 For more on him see: Hairi, "Al-Madjlisī", *EI*^{2}, vol. 7, pp. 1086-1088.

9 On the role of animals in classical Arabic literature see the Introduction in Prof. Kanazi's article, "Abū Bakr al-ᶜAllāf fī rithāʾ hirr", pp. 201-203.

10 See, for example: al-Thaᶜālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, pp. 446-449.

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The works in question differ from each other with respect to the motives for their composition and their purpose, and as a result they naturally also differ in content. Some writers used animals as a means for getting their message across. This is the case, for example, with *Kalīla wa Dimna*, translated from Hindi into Persian and then, during the first half of the second century AH, from Persian into Arabic. This book gave the initial impetus to the development of Arabic folk literature on animals.

In the course of time, as the nomadic Bedouin desert Arabs became sedentary city dwellers, their attitude towards nature changed as well.[11] They began to take an interest in birds and animals with which they were not acquainted when they lived in the desert, including various species of striking-looking birds. This gave rise to a number of voluminous compositions on animals, such as the early work *K. al-Ḥayawān* by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) and the much later *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā* by al-Damīrī (d. 1405), both of which contain a wealth of detailed information about the animal world. In the Qurʾān ants are mentioned,[12] as is a hoopoe which speaks to King Solomon.[13] Elsewhere a bird praises God.[14] There are references to other beasts as well.

Three compositions about birds from the Abbasid period deserve to be mentioned here: *Kitāb al-ṭayr* by Aḥmad b. Ḥātim al-Bāhilī[15] (d. 846); a book by Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī[16] (d. 862); and a work by Kamāl Mujāshīʿ b. Aslam b. Muḥammad b. Shujāʿ al-Ḥāsib[17] (d. 951). In subsequent times we find philosophical compositions about birds, such as Ibn Sīnā's (d. 1077) *Risālat al-ṭayr*, a work by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and Farīd al-Dīn al-ʿAṭṭār's (d. 1229) *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*. The latter two works are of a mystical nature, in which birds are described as wanting to approach God, stand before His throne and state their willingness to join the legions of angels in God's service.[18] Still later there are Zayn al-Dīn ʿUmar b. al-Muẓaffar al-Wardī's (d. 1445) *Manṭiq al-ṭayr bi-irādat al-khayr* and Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Ḥajala al-Tilmisānī's (d. 1375) *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*,[19] both about birds. Small wonder, then that the authors of the *maqātil* make use of birds in their writings.

[11] A very clear expression of this change can be found, for example, in the Arabic poetry of the period. For more details see von Grunebaum, "The Response to Nature", pp. 137-151.

[12] Q 27:16.

[13] Q 27:20.

[14] Q 24:12.

[15] See Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 61.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 339.

[18] See Saʿd al-Dīn, "al-ʿAnqāʾ", pp. 128-134; see also al-Ghazālī, *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, pp. 67-69.

[19] See Ḥājjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, vol. 2, p. 692.

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Birds in Shᶜīte thought play numerous roles, as follows:

Birds which sound curses against those who hate the Shīᶜites

According to Shīᶜite belief their imām can understand and communicate with birds just as Solomon did. Among the imāms' favorite birds were larks, whose song they interpreted as a hymn of praise to God which, so they understood, included the phrase "May God curse those who hate Muḥammad's family ["Muḥammad's family" = the Shīᶜites]".[20] For this reason the eighth imām, ᶜAlī al-Riḍā[21] (d. 818 CE) forbade the Shīᶜite community to eat the flesh of the lark, to curse this bird or to permit children to toy with it.[22] The lark was so much appreciated by Shīᶜites that it was related of the imām ᶜAlī b. al-Ḥusayn[23] (d. 713 CE) that he would sow a field not in order to grow a crop but only so that the larks could feed, so much were they loved and appreciated.[24] In yet another tradition, related by Muḥammad b. Muslim,[25] the latter reports:

> I went out with Abū Jaᶜfar [the fifth imām of Twelver Shīᶜism, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, d. 732 CE]. Eventually we found ourselves in a dry, very hot valley. There were some sparrows there which hovered around his mule. He held them back and said repeatedly: "No go away!". Then Abū Jaᶜfar went to his destination. And on the following day, as we went back and came once again to that valley the sparrows flew to him again and circled around his mule, flapping their wings. Whereupon I heard him say: "Drink and quench your thirst". I looked and saw that there was some water in the valley. I then asked Abū Jaᶜfar: "Yesterday you refused water to the sparrows and today you gave them to drink?" He answered: "Know that today there were larks among the sparrows, and therefore I gave them to drink. Were it not for the larks I would not have given them to drink." I said: "Sir, what is the difference between larks and sparrows?" He answered: "Alas, the sparrows are friendly towards ᶜUmar [b. al-Khaṭṭāb] because they are like

[20] *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, p. 225 nos. 1, 3; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Āmālī*, p. 687 no. 1495-2; *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 61, p. 303 no. 7; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 16, p. 123, ch. 29 no. 19346-1; *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā*, vol. 1, p. 670.

[21] For more information on this imām see: Lewis, "ᶜAlī al-Riḍā", *EI*^{2}, vol. 1, pp. 399-400.

[22] *Wasāʾil al-shīᶜa*, vol. 23, p. 396, ch. 41 no. 29835; *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 61, p. 303 no. 7; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 16, p. 123, ch. 29 no. 19346-1.

[23] The fourth imām of Twelver Shīᶜism. For more details on him see: Kohlberg, "Zayn al-ᶜĀbidīn b. ᶜAlī", *EI*^{2}, vol. 9, pp. 481-483.

[24] *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, p. 225 no. 2; *Wasāʾil al-shīᶜa*, vol. 23, p. 396 no. 29836; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 16, p. 123, ch. 29 no. 19347-2.

[25] His full name is Muḥammad b. Muslim b. Riyāḥ al-Ṭāʾifī al-Thaqafī, his agnomen was Abū Jaᶜfar and his epithets al-Awqaṣ and al-Ṭaḥḥān. He was a client of the Banū Thaqīf and blind in one eye. He heard traditions from two imāms, Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq and is considered one of the former's two disciples. For more on him see: *Rijāl al-ᶜallāma al-Ḥillī*, pp. 149-150 no. 59; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, pp. 161-169 nos. 272-275; *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, pp. 323-324 no. 882.

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him, but the larks are friendly towards the Prophet's family and chirp they say 'Blessed are you, family of the Prophet, blessed are your followers [= *shīᶜa*] and may your enemies be cursed'". He then added: "Enmity towards us comes from everything, from the rock doves among birds and from Wednesdays among the days of the week.[26]

This tradition would seem to claim that Shīᶜite imāms were able to distinguish various species of birds and claimed to know which were hostile towards Shīᶜism, like sparrows and rock doves, and which were friendly, like larks, whose presence in a flock of sparrows caused the imām to treat them with kindness.

Birds which grieve for the Shīᶜites' misfortunes

Shīᶜite sources report that the swift (a species of swallow) is beloved of Shīᶜites, who are forbidden to kill it, for they believe that by its circles in the sky it expresses his grief at the tragedies and catastrophes which have befallen the Prophet's family and its Shīᶜite followers. They further believe that this bird praises God and recites the opening chapter of the Qurʾān. Here is a tradition related by Dāwūd al-Raqqī:[27]

We were seated at Abū ᶜAbd Allāh's place when a man passed with a slaughtered swift in his hand. Abū ᶜAbd Allāh [Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq, the sixth Twelver imām, d. 765 CE] immediately jumped over to him and took it out of his hand. He then spread it out on the ground... "My father told me in my grandfather's name that the Messenger of God forbade the slaughter of six species, including the swift".[28]

According to another tradition a person once asked Abū ᶜAbd Allāh about this species of bird and was told: "Do not harm them, for they do not harm anyone. This is a bird which loves us, the Prophet's family".[29] Although we are not told precisely what Shīᶜite tragedies are for which the swift grieves, clearly the imām, whom Shīᶜites credit with knowledge of the occult knowledge of the language of animals, interpreted the bird's

[26] The imām Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq relates that rock doves coo to Shīᶜites: "You are lost, you are lost" [*fuqidtum, fuqidtum*] and for this they deserve to be slaughtered. For more details on this tradition see, for example: *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, p. 343 no. 7.

[27] His full name was Dāwūd b. Kathīr b. Abī Khālid al-Raqqī, a client of the Banū Asad and a companion of Mūsā, son of Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq. According to al-Ṭūsī his reports are reliable. He transmitted a number of traditions in the name of Abū ᶜAbd Allāh (Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq). However, according to some collections of biographies he was corrupt and his reports are not to be trusted. For more details see: *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, p. 146 no. 584, p. 452 no. 173; *Rijāl Ibn al-Ghaḍāʾirī*, vol. 20, p. 290; *Rijāl al-Barqī*, p. 47; *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, p. 336 no. 5003-1; *Rijāl al-Ḥillī*, p. 67 no. 1.

[28] *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, pp. 223-224 nos. 1-3; *al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 9, p. 20 no. 78; *al-Istibṣār*, vol. 4, p. 64, ch. 43 nos. 1-2; *Wasāʾil al-shīᶜa*, vol. 23, p. 392 no. 29826, vol. 24, p. 147 no. 30205; *al-Khiṣāl*, vol. 1, pp. 326-327 no.18; whence *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 27, p. 261 no. 3, vol. 61, pp. 265-266 no. 20; *ᶜAwālī al-laʾālīʾ*, vol. 2, p. 325 no. 24, vol. 3, p. 429 no. 35.

[29] *Al-Kharāʾij wal-jarāʾiḥ*, vol. 2, p. 609; *Wasāʾil al-shīᶜa*, vol. 24, p. 149 no. 30210; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 16, p. 121 no. 19338-4; *Mustadrak al-safīna*, vol. 3, p. 124.

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circling motions as expressing sorrow and its cries as the utterance of the first chapter of the Qurʾān. Shīʿites thus gave the swift's peculiar circular motion a theological interpretation in keeping with their own history of tragic events.

Birds which express their love for Shīʿism

One species of bird popular among Shīʿites is the stock dove. The imāms recommended to their believers to grow this bird, which they believed praised God's name more than any other and loved the Prophet's family.[30] According to one tradition the imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq said: "The stock dove says [to the Prophet's family] 'May you be blessed, may you be blessed' [*būriktum būriktum*], so hold on to it".[31] Because this bird was believed to appreciate God's love for the Prophet's family Shīʿites frequently gave it as a present to each other and to their imāms.[32] White roosters were believed to harbor friendly feelings towards the imāms. Thus in a tradition related in the name of Abū ʿAbd Allāh he is quoted as saying: "The white rooster is my friend, and the friend of every believer".[33]

Here we have an imām claiming in an entirely explicit manner that white-feathered roosters are the friends of (Shīʿite) believers.[34] According to another tradition the imām ʿAlī was of the opinion that white roosters were more beautiful than peacocks and their voices more pleasant,[35] perhaps because of their supposed friendship towards the imāms.

Birds whose sympathy towards Shīʿites is written on their feathers

Shīʿite sources relate in the name of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib that the on the hoopoe's wings it is inscribed in Syriac that the family of Muḥammad (i.e. the Shīʿites) are the best in Creation. For this reason the hoopoe has become a favorite bird among Shīʿites, who are forbidden to kill or slaughter it. This tradition, if reliable, has the

[30] *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, pp. 550-551 nos. 1-2; *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, vol. 11, pp. 526-527, ch. 40 nos. 15449-15451; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 8, pp. 290-291, ch. 33 no. 9473-1.

[31] *Al-Manāqib*, vol. 4, p. 218; *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, vol. 343 no. 7; *al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, p. 551 no. 2; whence *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 62, p. 21 no. 31.

[32] *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, p. 343 no. 7; al-Mufīd, *al-Ikhtiṣāṣ*, p. 294.

[33] *Al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr*, vol. 1, pp. 659-660; *Kashf al-khafāʾ*, vol. 1, pp. 413, 422; *Rabīʿ al-abrār*, vol. 5, p. 443.

[34] The word "believer" (*muʾmin*) among Shīʿites refers to Muslims who follow the "true" path of Islām. It stands in contrast to the word "Muslim" which refers to Sunnīs who do not believe in the imāms. For more details see: Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, p. 146 no. 43; *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, pp. 27-28 traditions 1-2.

[35] *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 6, p. 550 no. 3; *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, vol. 11, p. 526 no. 15447.

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Shīᶜites believe that ᶜAlī knew the Syriac language[36] and that God was so interested in having the virtues of the Prophet's family known that he went to the trouble of disseminating the fact among readers of that language. The purpose of such a tradition may have been to both strengthen Shīᶜites in their belief and to convince non-Shīᶜites to adopt Shīᶜism after hearing stories of this kind.

Birds which are given food and drink by virtue of the Prophet's family

It is also related of the imām ᶜAlī that he once passed through a desolate are near al-Ṣafā in Mecca where he encountered a francolin (a bird related to the partridge). ᶜAlī asked it how long it was living in that place and where it obtained food and drink. The francolin answered him: "Oh Commander of the faithful, I have been in this desolate place for one-hundred years. Whenever I pray for you [i.e. for the Prophet's family] my hunger is quelled, and whenever I curse your oppressors my thirst is quenched".[37] This tradition, which ascribes to ᶜAlī an ability to speak to birds in the manner of King Solomon, and to the francolin knowledge of the bitter fate of the adherents of Shīᶜism, constitutes an implicit call for the adoption of the Shīᶜite faith. The tradition's message is that at a time when the enemies of Shīᶜism refuse to recognize ᶜAlī's authority and do not respect the Prophet's family, this bird behaves in a manner more fitting than they, whereupon it receives its recompense from God. The truth of Shīᶜism is taken to be demonstrated here by the fact that God chose a bird to testify to that fact.

A bird predicts ᶜAlī's death and mourns him

One of the many outstanding features which Shīᶜites ascribe to their imāms is that the latter know in advance when they will die.[38] Thus it is related that ᶜAlī, before he was killed by ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muljam (661 CE), knew the identity of his killer and how he would be killed. On the day that he was killed some ducks quacked and when someone in the house wanted to silence them ᶜAlī said: "Leave them alone. They are in mourning".[39] According to this tradition ᶜAlī knew that he would die and also knew that the ducks were in mourning for him. This is in line

[36] Syriac is not the only language whose knowledge is ascribed to the imām. According to the beliefs of Twelver Shīᶜism their imāms know all languages, including the languages of birds and beasts. For more on this topic see, for example: Loebenstein, *Miracles*, pp. 217-218; *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, p. 343 no. 11; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, p. 93.

[37] *Al-Yakqīn*, p. 266-267 no. 92, p. 404 no. 147; *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 41, p. 235 no. 6; *al-Faḍāʾil*, p. 162.

[38] For more on this topic see, for example: Loebenstein, *Miracles*, pp. 220 ff.; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, p. 261 no. 46.

[39] *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. 2, p. 425; *Maqtal amīr al-muʾminīn ᶜAlī*, p. 26.

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with Shīʿite belief, that the imām is not like ordinary mortals, since he is charged with completing the mission of the prophets. It is therefore no wonder that the Shīʿites believe that God would make ducks mourn over him.

A white bird announces the death of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī

A Shīʿite tradition states that when Ḥusayn was killed at Karbalāʾ a white-feathered bird came and dipped its feathers in Ḥusayn's blood. It then flew towards some other birds which stood in the shade on some trees and talked about food and water. The bird covered in Ḥusayn's blood said to them: "How can you just think about the pleasures of this world while Ḥusayn's body lies on the sands of Karbalāʾ in the burning heat?" Whereupon the birds flew to Karbalāʾ and saw Ḥusayn's body, headless, devoid of a shroud, crushed by horses' hooves, surrounded by wild beasts, and moaned by demons in the forests. When the birds saw the state of Ḥusayn's body they landed, dipped their feathers in his blood and flew away, each in a different direction, in order to announce Ḥusayn's death to members of his family. One bird flew to al-Madīna and began circling over the Prophet's tomb with Ḥusayn's blood dripping down from his feathers. It brought the news of Ḥusayn's death to the Prophet, whereupon all the birds gathered around it and cried in mourning. When the people of al-Madīna saw the birds and the dripping blood they did not know what to make of them. But after a time the news of Ḥusayn's death reached them and they realized that the blood-dripping bird meant to inform the Messenger of God that his grandson, son of his beloved daughter Fāṭima, had been killed.

The tradition adds that at the time there lived in al-Madīna a Jew with a deaf, blind, paralyzed and leprous daughter. The Jew was in the habit of taking his sick daughter to an orchard outside the city. It happened that on the day the blood-covered bird came to the town the daughter was left overnight in the orchard. The bird also stayed in the orchard and cried. The daughter heard its cries, went over to it and joined in the weeping. A drop of blood from the bird's feathers fell on her eye and she could see again. Another drop fell on her other eye, which also healed. Drops continued falling on her until she was completely well again. In the morning her father came to the orchard and when he saw his daughter he did not recognize her. When she told him what had happened he fainted. After he awakened his daughter took him over to the bird. The Jew then said to the bird: "I swear by you and your Creator that you must speak to me". God, according to this tradition, then made the bird speak and tell the Jew the entire story of how he came with Ḥusayn's blood to al-Madīna. When the Jew heard the story he said: "God must have deemed Ḥusayn very great and important, otherwise his blood would not have healed all my

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daughter's illnesses". The Jew then converted to Islam, together with his daughter and five-hundred members of his tribe.[40]

It is likely that the purpose of this tradition is to show that even a Jew believed in Ḥusayn's status and merits, while many Muslims, mainly Sunnīs, refused to believe in him.

Birds mentioned in the "Murder of Ḥusayn" literature (maqtal al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī) *and their roles*

After the dramatic death of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī at the battle of Karbalāʾ Shīʿite writers began to put descriptions of the event to writing in compositions entitled *maqātil* (singular: *maqtal*, "murder").[41] The earliest extant *maqtal* was composed by Abū Mukhnaf Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā (d. 775 CE). This had an important effect on the genre's subsequent development and the main motifs which appear in writings belonging to it: the dream, the prophets, demons and angels, Jews and Christians, Ḥusayn's thirst at Karbalāʾ and nature mourning over his death. These motifs[42] appear in com-positions from very different periods and places.

Descriptions of how nature mourns the death of a leader, saint, prophet, king or god abound in folk literature. Already the ancient Babylonians wrote numerous elegies mourning the death of the vegetation and fertility god Tammuz in the name of nature, which dried up and shriveled in mourning. The Greek version of Tammuz is Adonis, of whom it is also told that vegetation died and nature itself ceased its workings upon his death.[43] Among the components of nature which in the *maqātil* literature are said to mourn the death of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī birds feature prominently. Four kinds of bird are mentioned in the *maqtal al-Ḥusayn* literature: pigeons, (unspecified) birds, an owl and a vulture. Below we shall discuss each of these in turn and describe their roles.

The pigeons' curse

A Shīʿite tradition relates in the name of the sixth imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE) that pigeons of the *rāʿibiyya*[44] type curse the murderers of Ḥusayn when they

[40] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 45, pp. 191-193 no. 36.

[41] On the evolution of *maqātil* literature see our *The Maqātil in Shīʿite Literature* (Heorew).

[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 150-240.

[43] Willis, *World Mythology*. It is also the Christian view that when Jesus died the world shook and became dark. For details see *Luke* 23:44-45; *Matthew* 27:21-52; Sindawi, *The Maqātil in Shīʿite Literature*, pp. 147-148.

[44] Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, p. 98 no. 1; whence Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 45, p. 213 no. 33; vol. 62, p. 15 no. 8; *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, vol. 11, pp. 518-519 nos. 15425-27; *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, vol. 8, p. 264 no. 9456-2; al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, vol. 6, p. 548 no. 13.

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coo. This tradition tells that Dāwūd b. Farqad[45] sat in al-Ṣādiq's house, gazed at a *rāᶜibiyya* pigeon coop and listened to the birds' cooing. The imām asked him if he understood what the pigeons were saying. "No, I do not know", he answered. "As I am your atonement, these birds are cursing the murderers of Ḥusayn. Therefore I ask you [i.e. the Shīᶜites] to take pigeons of this type and grow them in your homes".[46]

In this tradition Shīᶜite writers utilized a well-known trait of this type of pigeon and provided it with an explanation serving their purposes: the pigeons' cooing is in fact a curse uttered against the murderers of Ḥusayn. The imām, an authoritative figure among Shīᶜites throughout his life, tells his congregation to raise such pigeons in their homes so that this curse will be heard in every Shīᶜite home.[47] Interestingly enough pigeons are reported to play a part in mourning according to Jewish tradition as well. They are said to mourn together with the Jews on the night of the Ninth of Ab, in commemoration of the Exile and the destruction of the Temple. According to Jewish sources when the Jews' lamentations reach heaven in the middle of the night a white pigeon appears and cries. According to Vilnay "every year on the eve of the Ninth of Ab one pigeon stands at the corner of the Western Wall; it will mourn all night and all the following day until evening".[48]

The mourning of the birds

Abū ᶜAbd Allāh (i.e. the imām Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq) is reported to have said: "I used to crumble seeds for the birds and they would eat from the palm of my hand. When the day of ᶜĀshūrāᵓ came, the day when Ḥusayn was killed, the birds would not eat, so I knew that they were fasting in mourning for the death of Ḥusayn b. ᶜAlī".[49]

This type of pigeon is considered as possessing a particularly powerful coo. Its name is derived from the town of Rāᶜib where it is grown. Pigeons of this type are relatively large and highly prized. For more details see: Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ᶜarab*, vol. 3, p. 15, s.v. "rāᶜib"; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 1, p. 455.

45 He was a *mawlā* of the clan of Abū al-Sammāl al-Asadī al-Naṣrī, agnomen Abū Zayd, from Kūfa. He is considered a reliable transmitter who quotes the imām Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq and others. For more details on him see: Najjāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 158 no. 418; al-Kishshī, *Rijāl*, pp. 345-346 no. 640; Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, p. 336 nos. 5004-2; Barqī, *Rijāl*, pp. 32, 47; Ibn Dāwūd, *Rijāl*, p. 145 nos. 582, 382; Ḥillī, *Rijāl*, p. 68 no. 2.

46 Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, p. 98.

47 It should be noted that even today Shīᶜites, especially in villages in Iraq and Southern Lebanon, raise this type of pigeon.

48 Vilnay, *Legends of the Jews*, pp. 124-125 (Hebrew).

49 Akhṭab Khawārizm, *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, p. 90.

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In this tradition birds behave as if they were humans, fasting in a demonstration of mourning.[50] In other words, when a superior person dies nature is in shock, and even birds change their habits.

Owls in mourning

In a tradition transmitted by Ṣafwān b. Yaḥyā[51] al-Ṣādiq explains to his acquaintances why owls cannot be seen during the day but only at night: "In the days of my grandfather the Prophet Muḥammad owls lived in houses and palaces in towns and villages. When people would sit down to eat they would throw them food. When the owls heard about Ḥusayn's death they took a vow not to live in settled places any more but only in deserts and ruins. Since then owls fast all day and mourn, and after nightfall they cry over Ḥusayn's death until dawn".[52]

Another tradition which explains why owls are only active at night is related by al-Damīrī in the name of al-Jāḥiẓ: Owls are afraid of the evil eye. They are convinced that they are the most beautiful creatures on earth they only come out at night so as not to become victims of the evil eye of other animals.[53] The former tradition shows how writers of *maqātil* took a characteristic trait of owls, the fact that they are nocturnal creatures, and gave that trait an "explanation" consistent with their aim, of showing that nature mourns the death of Ḥusayn.

In Classical Arabic poetry providing an explanation for some phenomenon is an accepted rhetorical device, called by Arab rhetoricians *ḥusn al-taʿlīl* ("conceit giving a nice explanation").[54] Authors of *maqātil* compositions transferred this

[50] Shīʿites fast on the day of ʿĀshūrāʾ as a sign of mourning over the murder of Ḥusayn. See my "ʿĀshūrāʾ Day and Yom Kippur", *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 38 (2001), pp. 208-209.

[51] His full name is Ṣafwān b. Mahrān al-Jammāl al-Asadī al-Kāhilī al-Bajalī, agnomen Abū Muḥammad. He was a *mawlā* of the Banū Kāhil tribe, well-known in Kūfa, and considered a reliable transmitter, as was his father. He relayed traditions in Jaʿfar al-Ṭādiq's name. For more details on him see: Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, p. 227 no. 3063-42; Najāshī, *Rijāl*, pp. 197-198 no. 524; Ibn Dāwūd, *Rijāl*, pp. 188-189 no. 770; pp. 383-384.

[52] Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, p. 99 no. 1; whence Ibn Shahrāshūb, vol. 2, p. 314; and al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 45, pp. 213-214 nos. 34-37; vol. 61, pp. 329-330 nos. 1-3.

[53] Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā*, vol. 1, p. 232; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 61, p. 332 no. 6.

[54] This rhetorical device has a number of names in Arabic, including, *ḥusn al-taʿlīl, al-taʿlīl* and *ḥusn al-tawassul*. The Arab rhetorician Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī calls in *al-istidlāl bi-l-taʿlīl* and al-Ḥalabī uses the term *ḥusn al-tawassul*. For more details on this commonly used device of Classical Arabic poetry see: Akāwī, *al-Muʿjam al-mufaṣṣal*, pp. 392-394.

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device from poetry to prose, and thus mobilized an artistic rhetorical device for the purpose of enhancing their descriptions of the mourning over Ḥusayn.

The avenging vulture

Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā[55] (d. 774 CE) quotes an anonymous Christian monk who converted to Islam and while on pilgrimage to Mecca told the following story to people at the *maqām Ibrāhīm* there (the spot where Abraham stood in Mecca). One day while he was in his desert cell (*ṣawmaᶜa*) he suddenly espied a large vulture landing on a rock at the seashore. It threw up a quarter of a man and flew away. A few minutes later it returned and threw up another quarter of a man. This it did four times. Then the four parts united to become a whole person, but the vulture immediately returned, cut him into four pieces, swallowed them and flew into the sky.

The monk continued his account: "I was amazed at what I had seen. When on the next day the vulture returned and again repeated his actions I came out of my cell and asked the man: 'Who are you?' He answered: 'I am the caliph Yazīd b. Muᶜāwiya, the murderer of Ḥusayn b. ᶜAlī'. I asked him who Ḥusayn was and he told me that he was the grandson of the Messenger of Allāh, may Allāh's prayers be upon him. I then converted to Islam and came here to the Kaᶜba and to visit the Prophet's grave, may Allāh's prayers and blessings be upon him".[56]

In this tradition Abū Mikhnaf creates a connection between ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muljam al-Murādī (killed 661 CE), the murderer of ᶜAlī, and Yazīd the murderer of Ḥusayn, by copying the tradition about the former and ascribing it to the latter, with some minor changes.[57] Interestingly enough this tradition was put by the composers of the *maqātil* in the mouth of an anonymous Christian monk, to show that even non-Muslims transmitted it, believed it to be the truth, and converted to Islam because of the events related in it. Clearly the composers of the *maqātil* wished to convince Shīᶜites of the truth of the account.

[55] His full name is Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā al-Azdī, one of the earliest Arab historians, a friend of ᶜAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the leader of the Azd tribe in Iraq and the author of some thirty compositions. For more about him see: Ibn Dāwūd, *Rijāl*, p. 282 no. 1292; Sindawi, *The Maqātil in Shīᶜite Literature*, pp. 58-68; Sezgin, "Abu Miḫnaf", pp. 5 ff.

[56] Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, p. 144. Note that in *maqātil* composed in modern times this story has been elaborated and new elements added to it. See, for ex., al-Ḥusaynī, *Safīnat al-najāt*, vol. 1, pp. 168-171, where the author dedicates a separate chapter to the caliph Yazīd's end, entitled *Ḥadīth halāk Yazīd* ["The story of Yazīd's death"]; see also Mughniya, *al-Majālis al-ḥusayniyya*, p. 132; and al-ᶜĀmilī, *al-Mufīd*, p. 202.

[57] Al-Shabalanjī, *Nūr al-abṣār*, pp. 189-190; see also al-Fayrūzabādī, *Faḍā'il al-khamsa*, vol. 3, pp. 87-88.

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It is not by chance that the vulture was mobilized to play a part in the story. Vultures are birds of prey that can attack even human beings. The authors of the *maqātil* exploited this characteristic and added to it a mythological dimension. The vulture who cuts up Yazīd and then regurgitates him would appear to fulfill the Shīʿites' fervent wish to avenge themselves of Yazīd. The vulture's act leads to catharsis, in the Aristotelian sense, of purification preceded by feelings of fear and pity.[58] Catharsis liberates the reader from these feelings, which filled him as he read the story. The Shīʿite reader's involvement in the story of Ḥusayn's death and his identification with the latter's fear, sorrow and pain, demand release at the moment of climax. It is as if the composers of the *maqātil* made certain that their readers would find relief from the emotional tension they felt by this description of Yazīd's fate at the end of the story.

We should note that in the Qurʾān[59] there is a story about a bird which punishes in the context of the "Battle of the Elephant" (570 CE). Abraha, the Ethiopian governor of Yemen, built a church in Sanaa, the Yemenite capital, in order to draw the Arabs away from the Kaʿba, the central shrine in Mecca. Abraha attacked Mecca with elephants but was forced to withdraw because God (according to the Muslim account) saved His shrine by sending in birds which looked like hawks, each of which carried three small lentil-sized stones, one in the beak and one on each leg. Every stone that hit a person killed him, and everyone else fled. Abraha himself was smitten by God and his limbs fell away from him one-by-one. His troops took him back to Sanaa, where he died after only a chick-sized part of his body was left. He did not die before his heart fell away, too.[60]

In the *maqātil*, as in the Qurʾān, a bird of prey serves as the instrument of divine punishment, used against someone who attacks a holy shrine or a holy person. In the case of the Qurʾān it is the holy shrine of the Kaʿba, whereas in the *maqātil* it is the holy person of Ḥusayn. In the Qurʾān the hawks come in from the sea whereas in the *maqātil* the bird is a vulture. Each kind of bird punishes in a different way, in keeping with its traits and the circumstances in which the punishment is meted out. In both cases the bird, as God's messenger, torments the person who has committed the sacrilege, in the Qurʾān the man who wanted to do harm to the Kaʿba and in the *maqātil* the caliph who gave the order to kill Ḥusayn. The authors of the *maqātil* were quite likely influenced to some degree by the Qurʾānic account.

In their use of birds to describe nature in mourning over the murder of Ḥusayn the composers of the *maqātil* enhanced the traits of pigeons, owls and vultures in order to provide an explanation which was consistent with their purpose, as this is

[58] On this concept see: Cuddon, *Literary Terms*, p. 114.

[59] Q 105:3-4.

[60] Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 44-45.

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often done in Classical poetry. What was this purpose? Ḥusayn was the son of ʿAlī and the grandson of the Prophet. He was the third of the twelve imāms who lead the Muslim community after the Prophet's death. The birds were in all likelihood "mobilized" by the authors of the *maqātil* in order to convince their audience that Ḥusayn was indeed a man of surpassing virtue and merit.

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SUMMARY

In the preceding pages we saw that the Shīʿite imāms believe that God utilizes birds to help them and the Shīʿite community. For this reason they urged Shīʿite believers to treat these birds well. Among the traditions concerning such birds which we discussed were the following: there are birds which have on their wings an inscription saying that people of Muḥammad's family are the best of people; there are birds who know of God's love for the Shīʿites and their imāms; birds cry when an imām is killed and express their mourning in a number of different ways: some change their habits and others curse the murderers and swear vengeance. On the other hand, other birds are said to pray for the welfare of the Prophet's family when they are hungry, and to curse the enemies of the Shīʿites when they are thirsty, actions which apparently cause their physical discomforts to disappear.

The purpose of the many stories in which birds identify with the Shīʿite fate and recognize its worth appears to be to stress the legitimacy of the Shīʿite faith in the face of its detractors, as if to say that God Himself makes His creatures – the birds – demonstrate His love for Shīʿites while many Muslims, especially Sunnīs, consider the Shīʿites as enemies and infidels. Another possible motive behind these traditions is the desire on the part of Shīʿites to dispel some of the pain which the followers of Shīʿism have suffered over the generations.

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